

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Threats to Stability

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Hobbes, T. (2007, August). [Chapters 29–30]. In J. Bennet (Ed. & Trans.), *Leviathan, part 2: Commonwealth* (pp. 144–159). Early Modern Texts. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hobbes1651part2.pdf> (Original work from 1651/1668)

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. Thomas Hobbes devotes chapter 29 to a discussion of some fundamental threats to the stability of the state, weakening its ability to secure and protect its citizens. Unchecked, such threats may ultimately cause the nation to collapse into civil war or become vulnerable to conquest by foreign aggressors.

The two major sources of instability that Hobbes considers are “bad initial construction” and “seditious doctrines” (p. 145). Generally speaking, what is meant by each of these two sources? How do they each tend to threaten stability? What are examples of each source of instability that Hobbes provides?

In looking at the United States, what bad initial construction (seen in its Constitution) and seditious doctrines (also in the Constitution and/or its current social and political culture) might Hobbes identify?

2. This concern with stability continues into chapter 30, where Hobbes now considers the role of the sovereign in maintaining stability.

Hobbes begins by claiming that stability requires that the sovereign hold a tremendous amount of power (as we have seen in the previous readings). What reasons does Hobbes give to support that claim?

Hobbes then argues that the sovereign must maintain stability through the civic education of citizens. That is, all citizens must learn about the nature of sovereign power, the rights of sovereignty, and the contents of justice. What exactly are citizens supposed to learn about these things? Why is their learning these things essential for stability?

After that, Hobbes considers how a sovereign must actually rule to maintain stability. Here Hobbes primarily focuses on the administering rewards, punishments, and taxes. On these things, what does Hobbes say the sovereign must do, and why will this promote stability?

In light of all this, if a sovereign follows Hobbes’ advice, is that sovereign going to behave like a petty dictator and/or cruel tyrant?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.